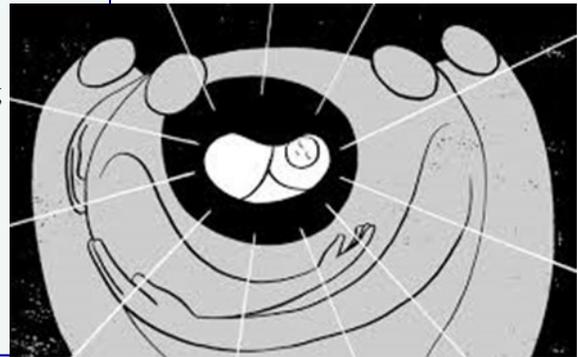


Topic: Incarnation and the promise of Discipleship

We often think of the Incarnation as a completed act. We think that in Jesus' birth we see an act of God that changes everything. Peace, love, and joy are brought into the world in a new way through this birth. Yet in reality, the birth of Jesus has only a minimal impact on life on earth. For a brief moment a few people rejoice, but not much else changes. Rather, what we see in the birth of Jesus is a promise. It is a promise of what God will do in Jesus. Yet the full truth of this promise takes quite some time to be revealed. It is only after Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and through the continuing presence of the Holy Spirit that the saving power of this birth can be known. Indeed it is only Mary, Jesus' mother, who goes through the whole progression from hearing the promises that come at Jesus' birth to seeing his life-giving ministry to understanding the transforming power of his resurrection. This is not a quick and easy moment of witnessing the power of God, but rather learning through patient endurance the challenge of being a disciple of Christ through all of the difficulties of her life. So too for us, we too quickly restrict the Incarnation to celebrating Christmas for a few days, rather than seeing it as a promise that in Christ God is with us. The truth of such an incredible promise can only be fully realized over time, as we come to understand the incarnation as an invitation to live out the promises of God in Christ through being a disciple.

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Bible Text: Luke 2:8-20

is the story of the shepherds in the fields around Bethlehem the night that Jesus was born. An angel appears to them and announces that the Messiah has been born, and can be found lying in a manger. The angel is then joined by a heavenly host who give praise to God. The shepherds then go into Bethlehem to find the child. They find Mary, Joseph, and the baby, and told everyone about what they had seen. Then they return, praising God.

Incarnation and the Promise of Discipleship

Law: While this story seems quite happy, with everyone involved praising God, it is striking how temporary this joy is. It would seem that after such an amazing event crowds of people would surround Jesus as he grew up, waiting for him to fulfill the pronouncement by the angel that he was the Messiah. Yet this does not happen. As we read on in Luke, we see that Jesus' ministry starts quietly, with crowds only gathering later. In fact his ministry starts with him being driven out of Nazareth. The shepherds tell those that they meet about them what they have seen, and it amazes everyone (v. 18), yet only Mary remembers the joy of this news, treasuring it in her inmost being. The others gladly enjoy the astounding story but do not let it touch their hearts deeply. Biblical scholar Raymond Brown suggests that they are like the people in the parable in Luke 8:13 who receive the Word with joy but have no root and so quickly wither. The shepherds themselves, meanwhile, leave praising God for what they have seen and heard. Yet they do not appear in the Gospels again. There is no indication of any growth in discipleship beyond this moment. There is no indication that they ever come to understand in what way Jesus is the Messiah.

Gospel:

The Good News in this text is straightforward: The Messiah is born. Yet it is worth noting that this accomplishes nothing in itself. Rather, the Good News here is a promise of what will be. The heavenly multitude, for example, already knows the significance of this event and so praises God in the highest heaven and proclaims peace on earth. This is similar to the shout the multitude of disciples make in Luke 19:38 as Jesus enters Jerusalem. The disciples there echo the angels by proclaiming "Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" Both are unique to the Lukan account. Thus the angels' praise is a promise later taken up by the disciples in faith. This is when the transfer of the heavenly promise of the Messiah that the angels make to the apostolic task of preaching faith in Christ occurs. The significance of all of this is then made clear through the crucifixion and resurrection.



Transformation: While for most people in this passage faith is a passing moment, Mary's heart is touched. She ponders what she sees and hears in her heart. In other words, the seed of faith is planted through the words of the shepherds. Their faith may not have grown beyond the experience of the angels' song, but their testimony is used by God to inspire deeper faith by Mary. It is in fact Mary alone from this passage who becomes a steadfast disciple in Luke's account. She appears again in Luke, and then is in the group that chooses the replacement for Judas among the Twelve (Acts 1:14). Mary's pondering of these words in her heart suggests that she puzzles over their meaning, coming to full understanding only after Jesus is enthroned in heaven. Yet this pondering serves as the beginning of faith; she is like those in Luke 8:15 who hear the word and bear fruit with patient endurance. Jesus also says in Luke 8:21 that his true mother and brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it. Mary is shown to be Jesus' mother in this spiritual sense as well as biologically.



Incarnation and the Promise of Discipleship

Preaching Law + Gospel = Transformation

Through the Law, God tells us God's vision for how life ought to be in this world. Law tells us what God commands us to do. Yet if we take God's command seriously, we will recognize how far short of it our lives fall. Thus the Law shows us our sin. Law tells us what we must do, but actually makes us realize that it is beyond our power to accomplish it.

Gospel, on the other hand, tells us what God does. Despite our failings, God acts with grace. When God's grace comes to us, not only are we forgiven of our sin, but the Holy Spirit empowers us to serve God out of love. In hearing the gospel, our hearts are transformed.

In a sermon, we hear the Law that tells us of human actions and reveals to us our sin, and we then hear the Gospel of God's unfailing love and mercy. Together they bring forth transformed hearts. In *Pathways to Preaching*, for each biblical text we will consider how the Law speaks through it, how Gospel speaks through it, and the transformation that occurs through the Word of God.

Songs and Hymns:

#46 O Little Town of Bethlehem, #50 Thou didst Leave Thy Throne, #53 It Came upon a Midnight Clear, #55 What Child is This?, #62 Infant Holy, Infant Lowly (from Pu8ji-Pujian Kristian, BCCM)

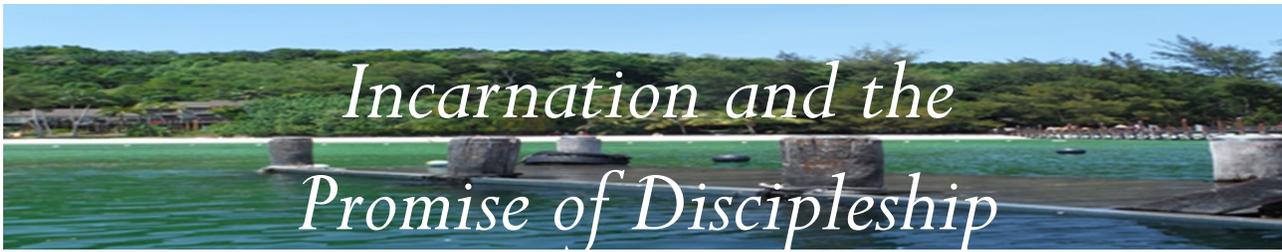
INCARNATION



"Many people have sought to be God, but only one God has sought to be man."

Theological Reflection on Doctrine

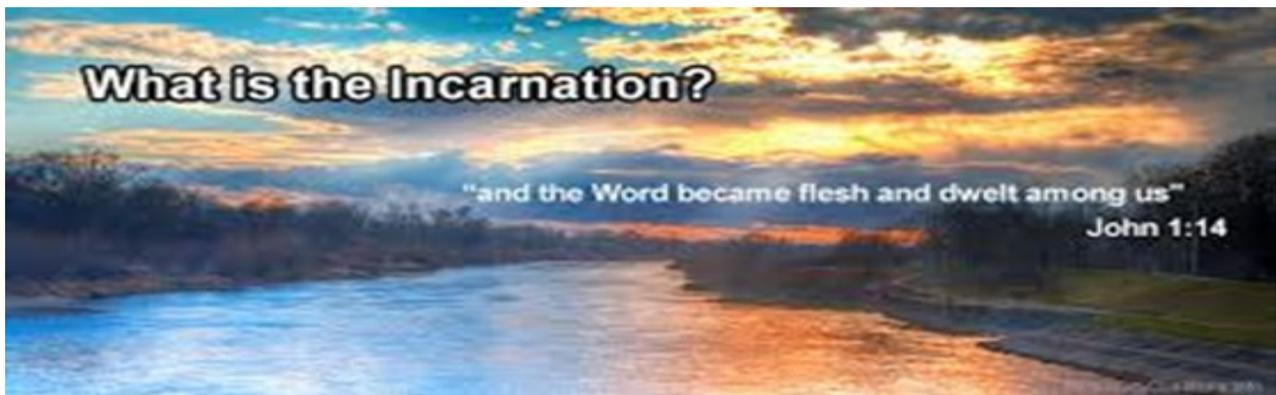
We often treat the birth of Jesus as a great moment of triumph. We consider the Prince of Peace to have arrived in the world, and the great divide between God and humanity bridged. Yet we see here that the incarnation is primarily a promise of what will be. It is not until Easter that the true meaning of the birth of Jesus can be known. It is only through his ministry, death, and resurrection that the reality of what it means that he is the Messiah can be known. It is only through the cross and resurrection that the great divide between God and humanity is bridged. At Christmastime we get a promise that through Christ humanity will be healed and the peace of the Reign of God may come to earth. Yet our world still shows few signs of such healing and peace. Sin, war, and division are rampant. Many Christians then treat the message of the incarnation similarly to the shepherds and most of those they shared their experience with that day. They find it a happy and comforting idea that God enters the world, but think little more of it. Yet the message of the incarnation is one that takes patience for inspiring deep faith. It leads us to follow the cross, following Christ into life that is not happy and comfortable but leads to healing and creating peace. That is, the promise of the incarnation beckons us to follow the way of the cross. It implants in us a faith that can sustain the struggles with the sin, war, and brokenness of this world so that we might proclaim in faith God's glory in the highest heaven.



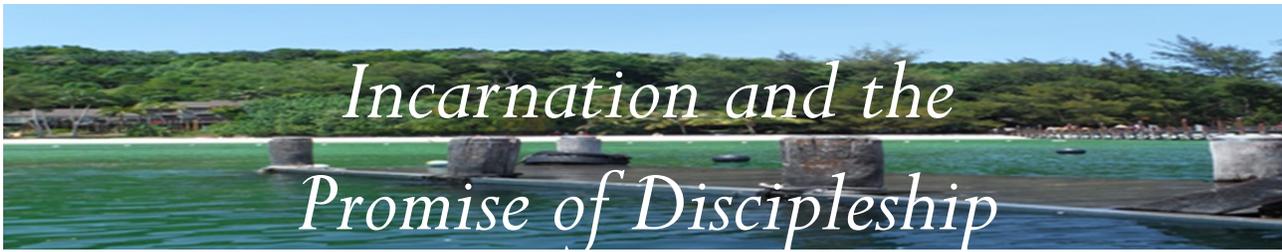
What do theologians say?

"Some may then ask why did God not manifest himself by means of other and nobler parts of creation, and use some nobler instrument, such as sun or moon or stars or fire or air, instead of mere man? The answer is this. The Lord did not come to make a display. The Lord came to heal and to teach suffering men. For one who wanted to make a display the thing would have been just to appear and dazzle the beholders. But for Him Who came to heal and to teach the way was not merely to dwell here, but to put Himself at the disposal of those who needed Him, and to be manifested according as they could bear it, not vitiating the value of the Divine appearing by exceeding their capacity to receive it." — St. Athanasius, Early Church Father, *On the Incarnation* 7:43 Available 1. <http://they3movement.org/2014/12/15-quotes-on-the-incarnation-to-get-you-ready-for-christmas/> and 2. https://www.hopefaithprayer.com/books/On_the_Incarnation_St_Athanasius.pdf (whole book)

"Only the humble believe him and rejoice that God is so free and so marvelous that he does wonders where people despair, that he takes what is little and lowly and makes it marvelous. And that is the wonder of all wonders, that God loves the lowly.... God is not ashamed of the lowliness of human beings. God marches right in. He chooses people as his instruments and performs his wonders where one would least expect them. God is near to lowliness; he loves the lost, the neglected, the unseemly, the excluded, the weak and broken." — Dietrich Bonhoeffer, from "God Is in the Manger: Reflections on Advent and Christmas"



Prayer: Heavenly Father, your love for us is amazing. You loved us so much that you sent your Son to be our Messiah, the fulfillment of prophecy and the birth of a new promise of salvation. Help us to be like the shepherds that followed the star and opened their hearts in praise. Help us to be like Mary, who took time to treasure Jesus and grow in her understanding of the hope we have in Jesus. Thank you for Jesus, our Saviour, for his birth, life, death, and resurrection. Continue to transform us through Jesus, the Word Made Flesh. Amen.



Bible Text: Matthew 9:9-17 Christ’s call is met with opposition

This passage takes place in “his own town” – in a strongly Jewish area. In the Gospel of Matthew, the setting has kind of a saint/sinner feeling – it is Jews over Gentiles, clean over unclean, faithful over unfaithful, insider over outsider, saint over sinner. Jewish people who keep the Law see no need to be saved, and yet Jesus’ name, given to Joseph by an angel, literally means “God Saves.” (Matthew 1:21) Jesus makes it clear that sinners are not outside of his love or his calling. Jesus calls Matthew, the tax collector, then eats with sinners (a terribly unclean act; yet Jesus showed in 9:1-8 that he can forgive sins and make a person healthy and clean).

SINNER	PHARISEE
Gentile/unbeliever/unclean/outsider	Jewish/faithful/righteous/insider
No stories of God, no Scripture; need Word of God (Jesus)	Wonderful history of God saving their people (Moses, Ruth, exiles, etc)
Needs doctor/healing/ Jesus (verse 12)	See themselves as healthy, not needing Jesus
Need mercy (verse 13a)	Offer sacrifices – make themselves right with God
Jesus comes to call sinners (verse 13b)	Righteous do not come to Jesus’ call
Rejected by community (and God?)	Accepted by community (and God?)
New wineskins	Old wineskin
BOTH new and old wineskins are preserved – God can act to love and save both (verse 17)	



Saint/Sinner

Law + Gospel = Transformation

Law: Jesus creates some serious conflict in this passage, because he refuses to act the way the world expects him to act. He is the Messiah, after all, the one the Jewish people have waited for, and they expect Jesus to become a political leader and reward them for their faithfulness. But Jesus does the opposite: he calls a tax collector (someone who has been stealing from the powerless Jews), eats with sinners, does not fast with the Pharisees, and heals and forgives ordinary people, giving them his attention and giving them new life. Jesus has come into a world that is like our world today: people expect perfection, and they expect people inside their group to get special attention. Whether that group is a church, turning away people who are not “good enough,” or a business that gives deals only if you have a friend that works there, or an office that helps one group of people but not another. The world selfishly says to take care of the insiders and ignore the outsiders, but Jesus refuses to do that. Jesus will be rejected by the world because he chooses to reach out to every person, whether they seem holy or not, whether they are Jewish or not, whether they are foreign or not. Jesus is not the Messiah that the Jewish community expects, and so they reject the salvation he offers. This is where we see the world condemned by God’s law. Does the world have a future? Can the world be saved?

Gospel: Where the world expects insider treatment, God expects us to come when God calls us. Jesus calls rejected people to be his disciples – and this is good news for us today. We do not have to be perfect to be called; we do not have to already know the Bible to become Jesus’ disciple. Because God is so good, God puts goodness in us. Some of us already feel like saints, if we have a place in the Church, if we feel God’s love in our lives, and saints can seek out Jesus, to feel his love and wisdom. But sinners do not even have to seek Jesus out – Jesus comes to sinners, talks to them, eats with them, heals the, loves them. Eventually Jesus will even give his body and blood, to be eaten by us in communion.

Jesus reminds the Pharisees of a verse from Hosea 6:6, “I desire mercy not sacrifice.” Hosea is a prophetic story of Israel’s sin and God’s redemption (see especially Hosea 11:9-11). Jesus is telling the people that mercy is more important than sacrifice – that caring for the weak, the sinful, the outcast is more important than offering sacrifices at the Temple to make yourself right with God. Jesus says that mercy is more important than Law – and that we need to understand the law in terms of mercy. We should not look for ways to judge people and hurt them, but we should love them and let God’s Word heal them. The good news in this passage is that Jesus does not care if a person seems to be a saint or a sinner – he opens his arms to

both the faithful law-follower and to the wayward unclean person.

Sinner & Saint

Transformation: In this passage, who is transformed? In this passage, Matthew is transformed through Jesus’ call. Some traditions say that Matthew was named Levi, and that he received a new name when he became Jesus’ follower. Remember that we don’t name ourselves; names are given to us, just as Jesus gives a new identity to Matthew, from a tax collector who harms God’s people for his own gain, to a follower of Jesus who helps God’s people for Jesus’ gain.

In Matthew’s gospel, the Pharisees are not transformed; they are always shown in a bad light, trying to trick or harm Jesus. Yet Jesus still teaches them; he does not turn away from them. For us, part of our holy purpose as saints is to love those who are very challenging or unpleasant. We are called to be patient and to see the good in people, even people who act like the Pharisees. So even with difficult situations, we can find ourselves transformed into Jesus’ loving followers, and we may witness transformation in others when they receive love. People cannot see themselves as saints until they know they are loved by God. Or mission is to show people love.

Saint/Sinner

Transformation: (continued from page 7)

... Sinners in this passage may also be transformed into saints, as they sit at table with Jesus (an image of communion), hear his words, and receive his affection. For the first time, they are welcomed into the community of faith. This is like people in our congregations who may be unsure if there is a place for them in the Church or the Kingdom – when we feed them with love, with fellowship, with God’s word, and with real food too, they begin to see themselves as belonging to God. This is a wonderful transformation!

In Matthew’s gospel, the Pharisees are not transformed; they are always shown in a bad light, trying to trick or harm Jesus. Yet Jesus still teaches them; he does not turn away from them. For us, part of our holy purpose as saints is to love those who are very challenging or unpleasant. We are called to be patient and to see the good in people, even people who act like the Pharisees. So even with difficult situations, we can find ourselves transformed into Jesus’ loving followers, and we may witness transformation in others when they receive love. People cannot see themselves as saints until they know they are loved by God. Our mission is to show people love.



Theological Reflection on Doc-

trine: An image of sainthood: During your sermon, hold up a chocolate candy, and say, “this is good; I will save- it for later” (save meaning hold onto, not as rescue) – and then act like you are going to put the chocolate in your pocket. Ask, “is it a good idea, to hold this in my pocket?” No, because holding it in your pocket is not the purpose

the candy was made for, and it will melt and be very messy. The candy is made to be enjoyed. Maybe you can give everyone a candy to enjoy immediately.

We are like the candy: we have a purpose, and that purpose is not something for later. Our holiness is not just for in heaven, after we die. Our purpose is to be saved TODAY, so we can be saints who show God’s love to others TODAY. Our faith is not just about heaven – that would be like putting a candy in your pocket for later. God wants us to make the world sweet, take away the world’s bitterness, today. Jesus wants the Kingdom to come near to people right now! The Spirit gives us this calling and Jesus teaches his disciples how to show people mercy. Even though we are sinners, we are also saints, and we are given a holy purpose to share with the world.

Saint/Sinner

What theologians say: The Third Article: *Of Sanctification.*

The Creed says: “I believe in the Holy Ghost; one holy Christian Church, the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.”

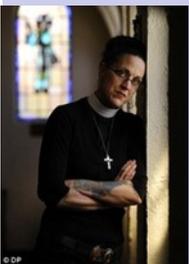
Martin Luther wrote: What does this mean? I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith; even as He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith; in which Christian Church He forgives daily and richly all sins to me and all believers, and at the last day will raise up me and all the dead, and will give to me and to all believers in Christ everlasting life. This is most certainly true.

<http://bookofconcord.org/smallcatechism.php#creed> <https://archive.org/details/KatekhismusKecilMartinLutherMultiBahasa> (Bahasa Indonesia)

Editor’s note: *Note what actions the Holy Spirit does to turn sinner to saint:*

- *calls through the Gospel,*
- *enlightens (light helps us see and understand),*
- *sanctifies (makes holy),*
- *forgives daily (because we are still sinning every day, and God keeps making us holy),*
- *and will raise us up (the Spirit of God raises us from the lowly place that we choose through our sin; we can not work to earn our place in the Kingdom, it is a gift of the Triune God – Creator who makes us good, Redeemer who takes away our sin, and Sanctifier who opens us up to new, holy life.)*

We can say “Amen” at the end of the Creed because we place our faith in God’s hands. The Creed is like a prayer, in which we glorify God and invite God further into our daily living.



“It has been my experience that what makes us the saints of God is not our ability to be saintly, but rather God’s ability to work through sinners. The title ‘saint’ is always given, never earned. Or as the good Saint Paul puts it, ‘For it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.’ (Philippians 2:13).” -- Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber, from the book *Accidental Saints*, page 7. She is pastor of a church called “House for All Sinners and Saints” in the United States.

Songs and Hymns: Prayer: Thank you, O God, for saving us. You see good in us that

#81 Fill Me Now

#293 S’lamat (Redeemed)

309 Take my Life and Let it Be,

#328 There is Power in the Blood

we often ignore; you forgive our sins and make us holy again and again. You call us to be saints, you give us gifts and skills so that we can serve you. When we fail, you send us teachers and Christian friends to help us. And when we cannot make right from the wrongs we have done, you forgive us and make us new again. Thank you, O God, for making us saints. Thank you, O God, for loving us even when we are sinful. Thank you, O God, for saving us. Amen.